

THE FRAGILE HEART OF THE CITY. THE CASE OF RAGUSA, SICILY

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Abstract

The conference introduces one of the international workshops we organized in 2014-15 about urban regeneration. The selected theme for the Ragusa Workshop concerned the regeneration of the historic centre of Ragusa Superiore, the “new town” built on a higher plateau after the earthquake which destroyed the old city in 1693. The historic centre, shaped with a compact gridiron plan, embeds several late-baroque monuments for which was declared an UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2002.

The denser part of this fabric, made of an extensive grid of small blocks, each composed by tiny lots, has gradually proved inadequate to accommodate the new housing needs, forcing residents to look elsewhere for more sustainable conditions. The strict regulation imposed on the whole historic centre has strongly contributed to freeze this condition, by preventing the necessary renewal process. The consequence has been a gradual depopulation of the old town that led to a large urban and social decay.

Using a multidisciplinary approach, the Workshop aimed to test “on-site” strategies for urban renewal that could suggest integrated solutions, to these several issues: preservation of architectural and urban character of the site, building and public space renovation, upgrading to current housing and circulation needs, creation of safety areas for both seismic and hydrogeological risks. In the conference we shall also introduce 3 Diploma Projects presented by our students in 2015 and 2016 in our school of Architecture in Milan Polytechnic University.

A southern Italian historical centers issue

The abandonment of the urban space is always a dramatic event. If we can understand the divestment of the former industrial areas and installations whose life is bound to end with the completion of a production cycle, it is more difficult to accept a process in which urban communities progressively abandon the heart of their city, areas and locations where they were born and have been formed over the centuries by cultivating the common way of living that is the very reason for their identity. Here there is not only a decay of *utilitas*, there is a much more serious and irremediable loss of social life, memory and culture.

The weakening, bleeding and abandoning of city centers has followed the long phase of development of our country since the second world war, it's been in a certain way its negative footprint. For several decades a slow and relentless process of erosion has deeply consumed the social structure and the physical fabric of our cities, triggered by an idea of progress that moved the inhabitants to migrate to the suburbs, at first to approach new working places, then to settle in less congested areas looking for more suitable housing conditions, characterized by more efficient accessibility and more comfortable private sphere. This promise of improvement, fueled by a gradual growth of economic well-being, has encouraged urban communities to shift outside the center their housing and the other utilities. Here started a fatal decline of both private and public space in historical center. In this way started an inversion process between center and periphery: instead of developing as an organic extension of the ancient city, the modern city grew in opposition to the old one, replacing and appropriating its values and its functions, so that city centers were put aside and rejected.

In a contemporary view this phenomenon, whose catastrophic signs still afflict the hearts of many Italian cities, seems a paradox. Facing the widespread approval of contemporary urban territories, it's out of doubt that the compactness of the historical centers is the most authentic expression of sociality and urban vitality, the site where people settled and developed their common values of citizenship, in opposition to the sprawl of the recent urban districts. These districts are often disjointed and characterized by mono-functional residential areas, grown according to the real estate profit and land consumption, in a lack of public space and utilities, above all unable to provide the residents with that sense of belonging which was the main value of ancient settlements.

So, how can be possible that many historical or pre-industrial centers with their intrinsic morphological and landscape quality cannot yet find the way of redevelopment and reuse?

Despite the intense activities promoted by Italian and European urban culture and local communities, despite the many experiences and investments that tried to build new living conditions in the oldest urban contexts, today, more than fifty years after the publication of the first *Gubbio Charter* (1960), the problem of historical centers still remains in many cases an open "question".

Today we can say that from the 60s, the problem of the historical centers persistence has gradually changed. This because of the progressive shift from a more static vision of the protection focused on the mere conservation of single buildings or monuments to a more

dynamic approach, which links the problem with sustainable strategies of urban and territorial development.

In general the Italian experience of urban regeneration has encouraged over all the regeneration of those city centers that are characterized by unique and complex urban design, qualified by the presence of historical monuments and architectures. On the other hand the poorest ancient city boroughs, mainly residential and often consisting of modular fabrics with simple building types escaped the actions of protection and has been forgotten without promoting any strategic plan of urban rehabilitation and reuse.

This difference is particularly evident in many Southern cities, where the plenty of this "second class" of historical centers with a lower monumental value shows still today the permanence of a specific "Southern city centers issue".

If the sharp opposition between the old and the new city was the most obvious effect of the territorial modification induced by industrial growth, its consolidation is the consequence of planning actions in the attempt to balance the propulsive thrust of the urban growth with a strong protection of the historic centers. But these actions produced the exclusion of the old centers from the dynamics of urban transformation. The conservative spirit of the first *Gubbio Charter*, spoiled by the long delay that preceded the drafting of urban rehabilitation plans, has led to the "freezing" of the ancient districts, locked in a generic obligation that condemned them to abandon and decay. In the meanwhile many historical centers of lesser monumental value were treated as areas of expansion, causing heavy changes and replacement of housing stock that ended up compromising the integrity and quality of the urban landscape. The remedy to this different planning treatment came too late to prevent that the gap between these two classes of historical centers could keep on until now.

In the last years, in fact, the policy of subsidies for the redevelopment of existing buildings in historical centers has encouraged the process of valorization and revitalization of the richest centers with architectural and monumental presences, certainly more attractive for tourism and real estate market, while the poorest and more residential districts, often consisting in lots of small size and without particular monumental accents, persist in a chronic state of neglect and decay. If the public subsidy policies have been successful to start the regeneration process of the monumental centers by attracting and conveying private investment, the same policies are not enough to regenerate the second type of historical centers. These less attractive, dense and poorer centers require the adoption of more courageous steps, but at first the development of a project: a bold strategic project that, moving from the analysis of the urban structure could translate its potential within a broader vision on the future of the city as a whole. A regeneration project which, operating in an integrated way on the specific strengths of the urban and social fabric, will ease the revive and re-appropriation by the urban community.

The integration between historical heritage and contemporary urban design requires a broader vision, aimed to understand the peculiarities of each specific situation and to identify the most suitable tools to support the key role that in the different cases the historic center can play as an engine of the whole urban and regional renewal process.

The most recent social and economical changes push us to look with new interest at all the historical city centers not only because they are our reserves of memory and culture, but above

all because they could be a real alternative to the waste of land and an opportunity to meet citizens' demand for more sustainable ways of living and experience the city: a new way of life no longer based on euphoria and expansion, but on a new culture of thrift and conscious use of sustainable resources that requires more sophisticated programs of redevelopment and reuse.

The unique duplicity of its historical center makes the city of Ragusa, in the South-East corner of Sicily, a case of great experimental interest, both for the implications linked to the different urban matrixes which characterize its centers and for the different protection policies adopted so far for both of them.

The shortage of a real overall strategy reflects the need of framing the issue of urban regeneration in a wider project widespread all over the city. Analyzing the urban fabric of Ragusa Superiore over the deceptive of the generic grid, the formal values and principles on which was founded the original plan are still recognizable: these are the proportional measures of the original grid, the inner street baroque perspectives and the relationship between the very compact city structure and the open surrounding natural landscape. Although with the confused process of enlargement, densification and speculation which took place from the end of the 19th Century until now the spirit of the original urban plan got progressively lost, the city imagined in the 20s shows us the way to a regeneration process based on its fundamental principles. This blend of vision and pragmatism which inspired it shows us the essential strategic dimension in order to transform the historical center in the development engine of the future city, which would be a more sustainable city where to reset that virtuous relationship which linked the community to its settlement.

Figure 1. General plan of Ragusa



Ragusa Ibla and Ragusa Superiore. Birth and development of a double historical center

To understand the peculiarities of the urban structure of Ragusa and the reasons that lead to the current state of abandonment of its old center it is necessary to provide some cognitive elements about the origins and geographical features of its settlement.

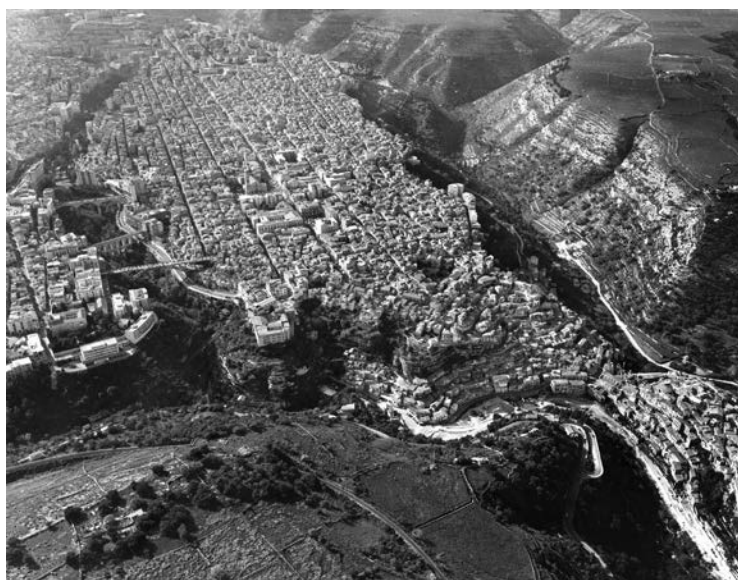
Ragusa is the chief town of the southernmost province of Italy and one of the eight towns in south-eastern Sicily that in 2002 have been included in UNESCO World Heritage List for the innovation of their urban plans and the architectural values of their late Baroque monuments.

The city's origins are related to the different civilizations that have crossed Sicily over the centuries: Phoenicians, Sicilians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Spanish.

Until the end of the seventeenth century the settlement was mainly concentrated on the eastern hill of Ibla, surrounded by single farms ("masserie") and fields fenced with traditional stone walls. But the current urban structure and even the origins of its architectural image are connected to the reconstruction process started after the earthquake that in 1693 destroyed all the major towns in South-Eastern Sicily.

The quarrels for supremacy between the families belonging to the two antagonistic parishes of St. George and St. John, as well as the social conflicts existing between the feudal aristocracy and the new agricultural middle class, led the city to be rebuilt split in two parts. The nobles chose to rebuild their new city on the ruins of the old one, gradually raising on the medieval urban plan new Baroque architectures forming the peculiar architectural unity of Ragusa Ibla, which culminates in the new church of St. George. The emerging agricultural middle class ("massari") chose instead to urbanize the "Patro" plateau, the highest hill west of Ibla, where they started to build a second independent core. The "new town" was planned according to an orthogonal grid. The "Mother Church", dedicated to St. John the Baptist, was erected just in the centre.

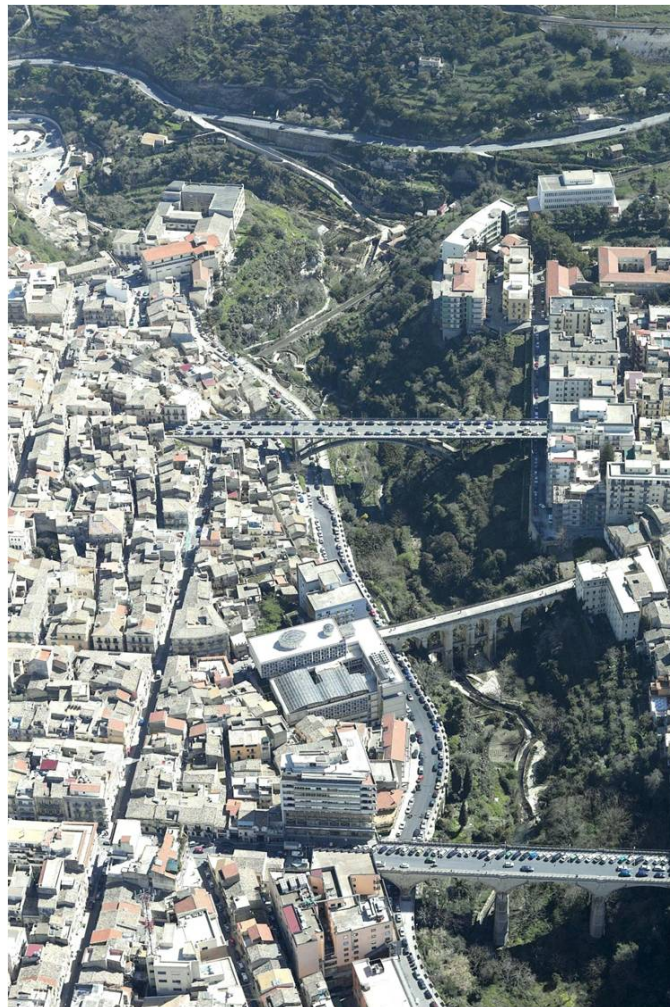
Figure 2. Aerial view of Ragusa Superiore and Ibla (right corner)



The building process of Ragusa Superiore proceeded from east to west through two and a half centuries. The fabric is made by two different parts with different types of blocks and buildings: the eastern sector is arranged according to an approximately 90x90 mt square grid; in its central area (among Via Roma, Via San Vito, Corso Italia and Via Vittorio Veneto) are inserted remarkable baroque palaces and monuments. Westward the grid is fragmented and subdued to a more intensive construction: small blocks are parceled into many lots, sometimes smaller than 20 square mt on which more recent and ordinary buildings are standing.

The dual slope of the ground, from west to east and from north to south, warps the final shape of the urban grid. On the borders of the plateau the fabric suddenly stops along the curved edges overlooking the two valleys that surround the hill: the deep San Leonardo valley to the north and Santa Domenica valley to the south. This one separates the historic center of Ragusa Superiore from its further extension southward, towards the railway station, whose development was increased after the construction of the Capuchins bridge at the end of the nineteenth century.

Figure 3. Santa Domenica valley



The undeniable lack of facilities, squares and public gardens within the city centre is the result of a gradual process of extensive densification and saturation. Two interesting masterplans tried to introduce inside the isomorphic scheme of the grid hierarchies and public spaces allocated in the different districts, but they have been ignored.

Figure 4. Ragusa Superiore Ecce Homo church



The first is the city plan drawn up by G. Migliorisi and approved in 1880, which provided for an adaptation of the grid to the needs of vehicular traffic, by widening some streets and integrating new facilities (market, theater) as well as squares (Casino and Serra neighborhoods) and public gardens (Borgo Cappuccini).

The second is the project drawn up by F. La Grassa and awarded at the competition for the new city plan in 1928. Here the “thinning” and street widening operations planned for the city centre were integrated within a general development of a new scale street network, supporting the natural extension of the city southward and westward.

In the Thirties, after the opening of the new bridge over Santa Domenica valley on the axis of Via Roma and the following implementation of a new square surrounded by public buildings (Piazza della Libertà), the southern district of the “New Ragusa” has been equipped with a new core located just midway between the historic centre and the railway station. The new square was designed by the rationalist architect Ernesto B. La Padula, well known as the designer of the Palace of Italian Civilization in Rome EUR district.

After the Second World War the historic centre of Ragusa Superiore went through a gradual saturation while on the borders of the valley massive public and private buildings have been

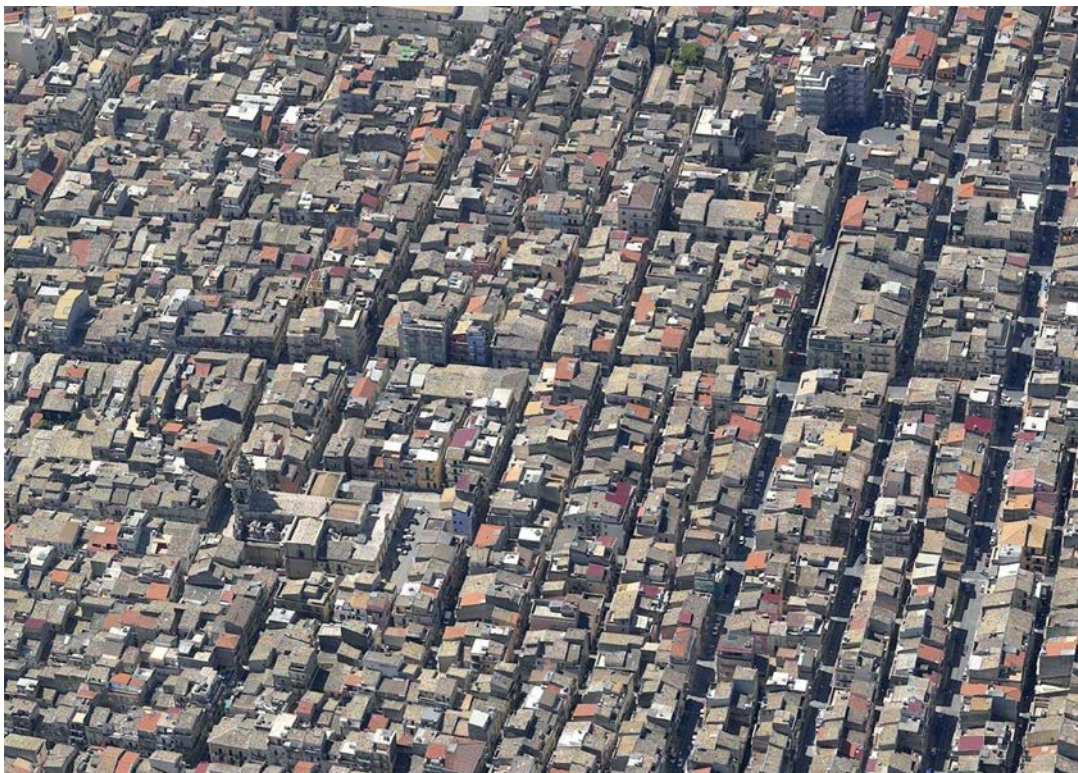
built (as the seats of the Province and the Civil Engineering). In 1960 it was built the third bridge as an extension of San Vito Street.

The city plan approved in 1974 left the old town of Ragusa Superiore out from the restricted category of “historic centre”, so that several buildings have been torn down to house very impacting multi-storey buildings, such as the INA insurance palace in front of St. John’s Cathedral, the Bank of Sicily, the new Courthouse.

Since that moment a gradual depopulation of the old town led to a large decay of houses and commercial activities that were forming the socio-economic fabric of the centre. Symmetrically an extensive building activity has been quickly developed westward, giving rise to new housing districts with several apartment buildings and detached houses. Furthermore on the coast a lot of summer houses started to be built in “satellite” and seasonal town of the Marina di Ragusa thus leading to a new doubling of the city: Ragusa is currently the Italian city with the highest per capita real estate surface.

The more recent Masterplan of the City Centre, which was enacted to overcome the deregulation of the previous years, introduced nevertheless rigid constraints that inhibit the regeneration process wished by the citizens. If today Ragusa Ibla regained vitality as a tourist and night life entertainment destination, Ragusa Superiore needs the launch of a new and extensive regeneration process that requires the set up of complex planning strategies and strong economic subsidies.

Figure 5. Compact morphology of Ragusa Superiore



Towards a project for Ragusa Superiore

The need to frame the issue of recovery of the old centers within a broader urban reform strategy had already been clearly expressed in the text of the so-called "*Second Gubbio Charter*", the document promoted by the National Historical-Artistic Centres in 1990 as an update of the first "*Charter*" signed thirty years before: *"the recognition of the historical values must be the starting point for designing the existing city, a project that integrates the historic center with the urban periphery of the city and its territory, by uniform and integrated methods of rehabilitation."*

We must therefore argue, in a comprehensive reform perspective, what might be the role that the historic center of Ragusa Superiore can play in urban and territorial context in which it appears, also in relation to the most acclaimed historical center, Ragusa Ibla, to ensure that integrated policies of territorial balance should be promoted to improve the recovery of the old town, to stop the growth of a large periphery which fails to become a city (fig.6).

Figure 6. front view : Ragusa Ibla, Superiore and the XX century city



In the horizon of a progressive rapprochement of the two historic centers (also prosecuted without resorting to artificial transport solutions, but simply by implementing the public mobility along the ridge that joins them) Ragusa Superiore regeneration strategies cannot repeat "tout court" those used for Ragusa Ibla, the way may not be the one of the duplication or the permanent competition between the two oldest parts of the city, even for their evident

differences. The support policies undertaken for the revitalization of Ibla are not sufficient to reactivate the largest Ragusa Superiore, having somehow a less attractive historical center. But the different urban and environmental topographical features of the two historical centers rather constitute a great opportunity to develop different projects, adapted to the specific conditions of the context, exceeding the historical conflict between the two Ragusa and instead strengthening the mutuality and complementarity that can result from this particular condition of settlement.

If Ragusa Ibla, crystallized in its image of monumental architecture provides for some time as a still-live scene for tourism and leisure, Ragusa Superiore must find an original vocation to renew the imprinting of its original genesis, the expression of a dynamic entrepreneurial class, and return it to represent the future of the city, a city tired of consuming soil, a sustainable city where traditional values can support new ways of dwelling and living the urban space.

The reasons that curb the natural repopulation of the Ragusa Superiore historic center are different. Some are shared with any historical center, such as the difficult access, the plenty of building units which do not fit with the current housing standards, the lack of services and parking. Others are related to the especial shape of its plan and its morphology, such as the typological seriality of housing units: above all the lack of squares and public spaces, being the most authentic Italian expression of community life, which generally forms the bearing structure of the regeneration process and the main element of attractiveness of city centers.

The construction of new and qualified living conditions within the urban fabric of Ragusa Superiore can not therefore become only through building restoration programs and not even through the adoption of special financial laws to promote and encourage private investment. Without designing adequate public spaces, without specific urban reuse programs it is unthinkable to succeed in the rehabilitation of such a so dense and fragmented housing morphology. It is mandatory an integrated and multidisciplinary approach, first of all oriented in defining a new topography of public spaces within the existing city, which allows to qualify the urban context, encouraging a new urban re-use.

Coordinating within a single program the various aspects of the problem (social, economic, urban planning, legal, etc.) It is necessary a general review of the existing urban structure, to redefine its meaning with a new urban map based on the existing strengths, but also based on a coherent new design of its most problematic places, to correct some congenital problems and to adapt them to new planning opportunities.

In particular, the fragmentation and monotony of the western districts, substantially without squares and open public spaces, partly altered by incongruous interventions which have compromised its identity, lead us to think about the purpose of volumetric subtraction, which can be planned through targeted interventions to generate a network of small essential collective services to revive the residential life and restart the deployment of a new economic and social life. The multiplicity of functions is a precondition for returning to original vitality in the old town, as well as the formation of an appropriate framework of public spaces, which is essential to preserve and safe its historical identity.

Figure 7. Street in Ragusa Superiore

Designing a new public space topography means first of all rediscovering the abandoned, neglected or deleted places, cancelled by bad maintenance, forgotten by the common sense of urban space, starting from the ones that allow you to recompose the special relationship that binds city with its settlement.

The redevelopment of the south valley called Santa Domenica has in this plan a high priority. The symbolic and environmental value of this great natural space, interposed between the historic center of Ragusa Superiore and its modern extension to the south, cannot be dispelled by abandonment and neglect. The valley is a complementary part of the city which claims to be again part of urban settlement to renew the ancient relationship that linked Ragusa Superiore to the valley river. His recovery, now partly undertaken by some important cleaning initiatives which recall some landscape improvement interventions made for the Kolymbetra gardens in the Temples Valley in Agrigento, it could return to the city this large park, to compensate part of the shortage of public space that afflicts the urban fabric.

The recovery of the original mirroring between the city and natural landscape through the restoration of the panoramic views along the north and south valleys is as well a relevant step to give back quality to the city grid. Specific operations of "cleaning up" along the edges built illegally around two valleys allow to give back to the city its background, today denied by the curtain of buildings that disrupt the landscape perspectives; and starting at the same time a prevention program with a controlled sequence of demolition along the city edges, to create safety conditions in a location under high seismic risk as this part of Sicily is. These urban programs could over time allow the reconstruction of the external skyline of the city, that has been seriously altered by incongruous multistory buildings, giving thus new strength to the

visionary intuition by Francesco LaGrassa, the city urban planner that in the twenties of the last Century planned for the borders of the city suggestive “belvedere promenades” overlooking the gorgeous landscape.

Actually in the particular blend of vision and pragmatism that inspired the 1928 urban plan we can see the importance of a strategic view that is necessary to make the city center the new engine for the whole future city redevelopment.

The ambitious goal of urban socio-economic renaissance of Ragusa Superiore will take a long-terms program and involve the use of a wide range of tools for urban policies, as well as the integration of many specific skills and a close cooperation between public and private actors.

But such a complex process, which cannot ignore the difficulties of present situation related with local events, may not even exist in absence of a general Masterplan based on the core values that the city itself expressed from its birth and then has lost along its recent history. A huge potential that has to be carefully considered in the new city regeneration policies comes from the strong sense of belonging of large part of the urban communities besides the action of awareness to the places and their history that is constantly promoted and practiced by vivid associations of citizens. It is thanks to them that the awareness of the deep value of the urban experience can be reinforced and it is involving them that we can plan the new topography of the future city.

Re-use Ragusa: sustainable strategies to revive the city center international workshop 2014

We faced this general idea during the workshop “Re-use Ragusa: Sustainable strategies to revive the city center” (which took place in September 2014), where six groups of students and PHDs coming from different European universities (Catania, Siracusa, Milan, Krakow, Potsdam, Dessau) dealt with the theme of regeneration of the historic center of Ragusa Superiore and, in particular, of the most dense and fragmented part of the built fabric, set in west of Via Roma, used mainly for dwellings. The designing proposals pointed out the need of rationalizing the mobility and decomposing the undifferentiated grid of the plan in neighborhood unities, provided with their own services and with a inner network of pedestrian streets or controlled traffic zones. In the continuous mass of the built environment they imagined selective intervention of thinning in order to generate a system of small squares equipped with services for the residents citizens.

Figure 8. Ragusa Superiore workshop's locations

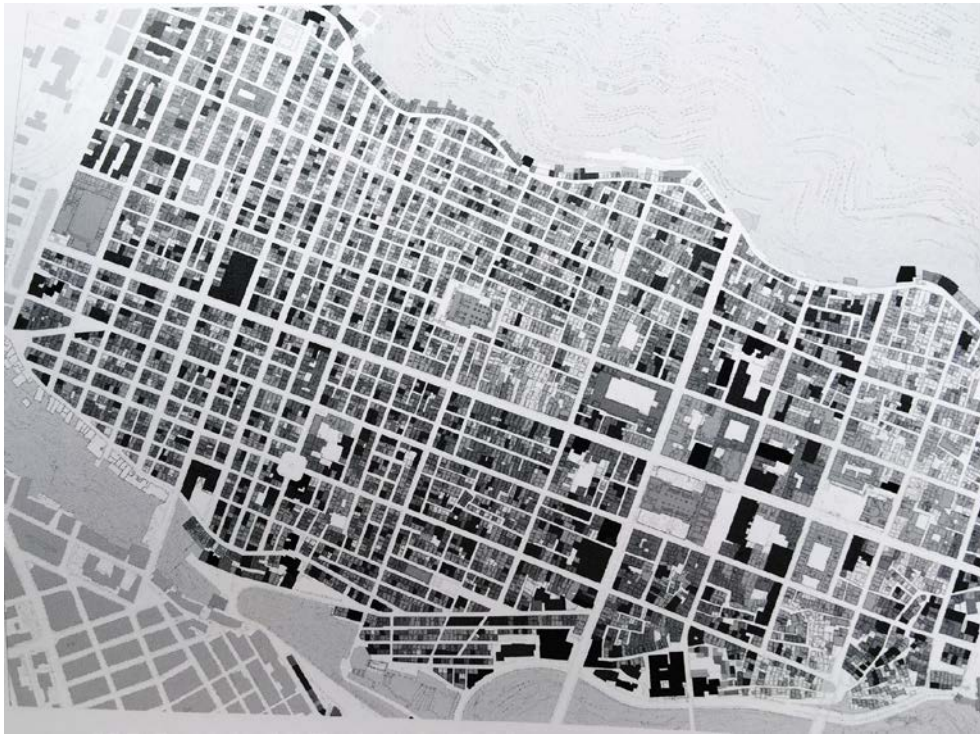


Figure 9. The 6 workshop's urban design districts



The typological investigation on the residential unities suggested to study a possible unification and lightening of the volumes, in order to improve the living conditions, the inner enlightenment and ventilation. Moreover, it had been highlighted the need of reactivate the previous visual relationship between the city and its panoramic landscape view, compromised by the barrier of recent buildings which occlude the view to the wide valleys.

Later, two master graduation thesis had experimentally studied further the theme of the regeneration of the densest fabric, proposing (***Ragusa Diagonal***) to engrave the planimetric grid with a diagonal sequence of small spaces connected between them by the exiting city grid and equipped by architectures of public service, and (***Regenerating boundaries***) the theme of the relationship between the city and the wide Santa Domenica valley, through selective intervention of reconstruction and re-use of some hardly degraded districts.